UNDERSTANDING ESPORT SPECTATORSHIP: PLAYERS, FANS, RECRUITS

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Introduction

While there is a significant body of academic research into eSports practice – the performance, play, professionalization and appeal of competitive digital gaming – there is comparatively little on eSports spectatorship. Little is known about the nature of media consumption around this emerging practice beyond the importance of live-streaming (both casual and competitive play) principally based on the Twitch.tv platform (Witkowski, 2012). Weiss and Schiele (2013, based on 2008 data) studied the reasons for watching eSports, finding that competition, challenge and escapism were positively correlated, but only examined eSports engagement in comparison to playing video games. Cheung and Huang (2011) found that eSports consumption motivations aligned with those of traditional sports. Taylor and Witkowski (2010) highlight how everyday play intermingles with eSports spectatorship as a seamless part of gaming practice. A more recent (N=880) survey by Hamari and Sjöblom (2016) using 'The Motivations Scale for Sports Consumption' (Trail and James, 2001) found that escapism, acquiring knowledge and enjoying aggression were the key motivational factors associated with the frequency of watching eSports. Hamari and Sjöblom also found that there was no correlation between player's (self-perceived) skill and watching frequency, and that

drama was not correlated with viewing motivations, a finding we believe is due to the current nature of eSports media.

In this paper we report on a study of eSports spectatorship in Australia. We identified three primary spectator types – players, fans & recruits – who have substantially different engagements with eSports. Correlating with prior work, Players were drawn to viewing eSports and engaging with third-party content that assisted their pursuit of expertise in the game they played. Fans were more likely to engage with multiple eSports titles and player/team personalities across multiple and integrated digital media outlets, and were characterised by an interest in physically attending tournaments, while Recruits, primarily non-players of eSport titles but 'gamers', engaged with eSports stories during notable tournaments and when encountered on social media and content sharing sites like reddit.com.

Research Approach

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with a breadth of eSports spectators (aged 16-48), recruiting participants via the University campus, a gaming café and at the 2016 'Oz Comic-Con' in Melbourne. Interviews were structured around 6 key questions which provided insight into (1) the breadth of ways that Australian eSports spectators engage with eSports, (2) how they were initially involved, (3) how they engage with traditional sports (if any), (4) in what ways people pay money for eSports, (5) the importance of tournament attendance to eSports spectatorship in Australia, and (6) interest in Australian specific eSports content.

Engaging with eSports

What is clear from this study and our prior work is that while the amateur play of eSports games drives engagement, ongoing eSports spectatorship and engagement (online and at physical tournaments) is intertwined with broader video game culture and engagement.

Player engagement with eSports media is driven by the 'metagame' and the way digital games are frequently 'patched' by the developer. In this use, the 'metagame' refers to what tactics and styles of play are currently popular. Competitive play – particularly team-based – requires an understanding of the metagame to best anticipate player strategies and play accordingly. P1 (24/M) noted that "keeping up with the metagame" and "trying to understand how changes would change the way I have to play" drove them to third-party sites to engage with eSports content.

The video game live-streaming platform 'Twitch.tv' is the dominant medium for live eSports spectatorship, with all but one participants having used Twitch at some stage. Engagement of this type is thus typically at home in the domestic environment via PCs or mobile devices. Of note in this regard is the fact that participants often did not differentiate between watching competitive eSports tournaments live and watching competitive eSports players live while they practiced, educated, entertained and interacted to build a fan base. Looking for top-streamers by games was often the method cited for this type of engagement. For Players, such practices are opportunities

to learn how to improve their play, while Fans utilize such streams to follow, support and learn about different competitors. As noted by prior work that has studied eSports players, it is through practices like these that competitors are required not just to be highly-skilled at the game, but also at entertainment. Recruit-spectators were less likely to engage with live-content at home, generally because it was often not pitched to their level of knowledge.

Video-on-demand (VOD) content via sites like YouTube was also a prevalent form of engaging with eSports. Players sought out VOD content that highlighted specific expert plays or curated highlights of large tournaments. Fans sought out a different genre of VOD content and were drawn to live content for shared, social experiences. Recruits sought out VOD content specifically targeted to outsiders with little understanding of the drama or content.

Beyond watching eSports matches, spectators (primarily Fans) engaged with eSports through following teams, players, eSports competitions and news sites on social media (primarily twitter and Facebook) "to stay in the loop" (P14, 27M). It is our impression that Fan spectators routinely and regularly engage with a wider variety of eSports content than Player spectators. A common criticisms of existing eSports media was that they currently "only learn about teams when they arrive at the tournament, you don't know their backstory" (P2/23F) which can often render tournament finals uninteresting when the best known teams are eliminated. Thus, by seeking out information about players and tournaments Fans are trying to build allegiances and relationships with eSports players that better contextualise and inform their spectator experience of live-tournaments.

Acknowledgements

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